

Special issue introduction

The body in politics — emotional, perceptual, and visceral dimensions

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Special issue editors

The relationship between the human body and politics, though complicated, is increasingly apparent. For centuries, there was little intellectual pursuit of the relationship, as first Enlightenment philosophers valued rationality over embodied forms of cognition and then popular misconstruals of both philosophy and science argued by assertion for a misguided social Darwinism. By the mid-twentieth century, political attitudes and behavior were for the most part deemed unrelated to bodily features and functions.¹ Over the past 50 years, however, there has been much progress in showing distinct biological correlates of political behavior.

On the one hand, this progress is attributable to an increased understanding of visual information processing: humans are wired to process visuals automatically as sensory stimuli with social relevance, whereas we must learn to process verbal information about politics over a slow and arduous process.² Interesting work published across a range of disciplines in recent years is showing how visual expressions and bodily signals are processed instantaneously and serve as reliable indicators of emotional states, behavioral intents, and even personality.³ On the other hand, with the advent of brain-imaging technology, we can now map with increased accuracy the biological markers of judgment and decision-making. This means that we can now associate political evaluations and behavioral differences with observed differences in brain activity and other physiological changes.

The contributions to this special issue touch on how we read others' bodies — perceptually, emotionally, and politically — and how one's own body is, on a visceral level, related to political preferences. The balance is tilted toward the later aspect of inquiry: the first four contributions provide new insights into how the body affects individual orientations toward politics. Peterson and Palmer, in their piece on the effects of physical

attractiveness on political belief, provide evidence that physical appearance influences political efficacy and political orientations, such as ideology and partisanship. They hypothesize that a likely explanation for this linkage is socialization, offering insight into the relationship between self and others' perceptions of the body (i.e., attractiveness) and political leanings.

In their study of disease salience, xenophobia, and support for humanitarian aid, Peterson, Gonzalez, and Schneider argue that contamination fears during epidemics may have much stronger influence on foreign aid attitudes than previously realized. If, as they find, this explanation holds more sway than explanatory mechanisms based on xenophobia, then their research has obvious application for media coverage of outbreaks: reassuring citizens of the low possibility of contamination during an epidemic may directly impact viewers' willingness to volunteer to help victims.

The next two articles in the issue address the influence of cognitive traits on political views. Keene and colleagues, in their investigation into the biological roots of political extremism, find that individuals' pronounced negativity biases predict preferences for extreme ideological views. By working with a measure of motivational activation, they find that people with strong negativity bias are more likely to report extreme conservatism, while those with low negativity bias are more likely to find themselves at the extreme liberal end of the spectrum. These response tendencies also affect information seeking on traditional and interactive media for both conservatives and liberals.

In an experimental design that demonstrates how conservatism and liberalism predict performance in two nonideological cognitive tasks with both Brazilian and American samples, Bernabel and Oliveira reveal that people at different ends of the ideological spectrum also show significant cognitive differences. Conservatives outperform liberals in tasks in which a conservative cognitive approach is favored, while liberals perform better in tasks that require more cognitive flexibility. The authors conclude that there are environments,

doi: 10.1017/pls.2017.28

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even some that are not overtly political, “in which the different cognitive skills of conservatives and liberals alternate as the most payoff-maximizing.”

Relying on a unique dataset of candidate drawings to make inferences about the influence of evolved psychological mechanisms on partisan identification, Schmitz and Murray hypothesize that party identifiers should exhibit adaptive behaviors when making group-related political decisions. They argue that modern political parties fulfill a human evolutionary need of association and, in this context, provide an explanation for perceptions of the physical stature of leaders. Consistent with expectations about coalitional psychology and adaptively influenced behavior, they find that partisans overestimate the height of their own party’s candidates while often underestimating the height of opposition leaders, confirming that partisanship is a fundamental force in political perception.

The next two articles in the issue deal with how people visually process politics. Gabriel and Masch, in a carefully conducted debate study of how emotional contagion affects evaluations of leadership, extend the previous leadership emotional display literature to the contemporary German context.⁴ They find that even within the same cultural environment, leaders on different points of the political spectrum elicit different reactions when displaying negative emotion: in the case of centrist Angela Merkel, viewers find cause to empathize, while in the case of more leftist Gregor Gysi, viewers show counter-empathic reactions. This evidence highlights the nuanced linkage between ideology, emotional display behavior, and evaluations of leadership.

Do people associate the body movements of politicians with their speech? This is the question posed in a novel experimental investigation by Koppensteiner and Siegle, which asked viewers in Austria to match politicians’ vocal characteristics with their bodily gestures. For the study, the authors distilled the body movements of politicians into stick-figure animations and separated the visual from the audio channel. The study finds that people do associate voice and gestures for the most expressive politicians. This suggests that visual clips, or image bites, of expressive candidates and officeholders can be significantly more informative for the public

than clips of less expressive politicians. In view of the growing reliance on image bites in campaign coverage,⁵ such findings point to a new dimension of potential campaign coverage bias.

The special issue concludes with a timely review by Schreiber on the advances made in neuropolitics over the past 20 years — and the opportunities that lie ahead. Schreiber, who was one of the first to study political questions using functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, locates neuropolitics at the intersection of neuroscience and political science. Given advances in both technology and techniques of analysis, the promises for further development in neuropolitics are enticing. Indeed, given the many advances being made to chart the relationship between the body and politics through brain imagining and related techniques, this burgeoning area aspires to the interdisciplinary goal of transforming both disciplines!

We hope the reader finds value in the collection of articles assembled here, and we look forward to tracking progress in these dynamic areas of research in the years ahead.

References

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